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Return of the Large

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By Terri Coles

TORONTO (Reuters) - Three years after phasing out its controversial Supersize menu, [McDonald's](#) has introduced two new large-sized items to its menus in select markets -- a 42-ounce soft drink and a one-third pound burger.

The U.S. Surgeon General called for the food industry to take action on portion sizes in 2002, but [a recent study](#) showed that fast-food portion sizes have not decreased notably since that time. In fact, for some restaurants portion sizes have gone up, even as companies introduce new, healthier menu items.

"When I first started doing my research, the fast-food companies were showing off about how good their foods were," [said Dr. Lisa Young](#), author of "*The Portion Teller*" and adjunct professor at [New York University](#), where she co-authored the study with NYU nutritionist Dr. Marion Nestle. "Now they're getting rid of words like "biggie", like [Wendy's](#), and they're just calling them small, medium and large."

The 2004 documentary "[Super Size Me](#)" shone a spotlight on large portion sizes at McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants. The film followed director [Morgan Spurlock](#)'s month-long diet of nothing but McDonald's, during which he gained nearly 25 pounds. McDonald's discontinued its Supersize menu that same year, but said the move had nothing to do with Spurlock's documentary.

McDonalds' new [Hugo](#) soft drink - which has about 400 calories -- is the same size as Supersize, though the company said it did not constitute a return of the option. The company is also testing its [Angus Burger](#) in Los Angeles, with plans to expand it to north-eastern markets.

The burger -- which has a 1/3 pound patty -- has 820 calories and 43 grams of fat when ordered with bacon and cheese. If eaten with large fries and a large Coke, the meal has 1,700 calories.

Young said that she was somewhat surprised at the introduction of the new menu items. "I actually kind of thought we were working towards this downward trend," **Young** said.

The new Hugo essentially amounts to the old Supersize, she said, because they are the same size, but it comes without the bad publicity a return of supersizing would have garnered.

In the 1950s, soda sizes at fast-food restaurants were about eight ounces, but a child-size soda is now 12 ounces. Servings for hamburgers and fries have also increased.

Early fast-food hamburger patties were about 1.5 ounces, **Young** said, compared to the five ounces in the new Angus Burger. That's nearly the amount of meat the USDA recommends an adult eat in one day, 5.5 ounces.

Americans spend half of their food budget on purchases eaten outside the home, and these meals tend to be higher in fat and calories, and lower in fiber. Meanwhile, prices have not risen proportionally to portion sizes, meaning that larger meals are usually a better monetary value.

Young and Nestle's study looked at portion sizes at McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King from 2002-2006 and compared their findings to examples from 2002 and 1998. They found current sizes are similar to those offered in 1998, but two to five times larger than what was sold when the first McDonald's restaurant opened in 1955.

McDonald's phased out its 42-ounce Supersize drink and 7.1-ounce Supersize fries in 2004, but Burger King and Wendy's actually increased their portion sizes during the time period of the study. As McDonald's eliminated Supersize, Burger King introduced a 42-ounce drink.

They also offer a burger weighing 12 ounces, more than two days' worth of meat under USDA serving guidelines.

In 2006, Wendy's got rid of their Biggie menu, knocked the size of the medium drink up to 32 ounces and added a new 42-ounce large. Wendy's also got rid of the Biggie size for their fries in name only. A 5.0-ounce medium became small, and the 5.6-ounce medium and 6.7-ounce large sizes replaced their Biggie and Great Biggie options.

Changing the names without actually reducing the portion sizes puts consumers at a disadvantage, **Young** said. "It's giving off the illusion that portions are not so big."

Large portion sizes are an important factor in obesity for three reasons: they provide more calories at each meal, they encourage people to eat more and they lead people to underestimate the number of calories they're consuming.

Essentially, if people are offered more food, they eat it. "I found in my research that there was a perfect parallel between the rise in obesity rates and big portions, because big portions have more calories," said Young. "We eat more when more is put in front of us. We don't even realize it."

Larger portion sizes also make it harder for people to follow the recommended guidelines for servings, because they distort our very idea of what a serving is. "A serving is a standard unit of measure that the government recommends," **Young** explained. "A portion is what you eat, regardless of the size."

But larger portions come with the allure of value, making it hard for fast-food restaurants to walk away from them. "It's a tricky thing, because a: consumers want big portions and b: they can get away with charging us more," **Young** said. "It's that combination that ends up making it a nightmare to deal with helping people to say 'Hey, we've got to reduce portions.' It's more work."

Several fast-food restaurants have added healthier menu items in recent years. McDonald's offers salads and deli-style sandwiches, and has made apple slices an option along with fries for its Happy Meal children's menu.

But even if these options give the entire menu a halo effect of healthfulness, traditional fare like hamburgers and fries still make up the bulk of sales.

People have to start voting with their forks and ordering healthier choices or smaller sizes if they want these options to stay on menus, said Young, because as some companies offer larger portions others will follow suit to compete. "We have to make up our mind that if we really want small portions, we have to order them."

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